

Statement of John Conyers, Jr.
Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
Hearing on Election Reform
March 7, 2001

There is one word that describes the 2000 elections: a disaster. Because of the razor thin margin of the Presidential election, flaws in our electoral system – which have existed for a long time – were exposed and our nation waited for weeks to find out the winner of the most important election.

More than anything else, there is one critical thing to remember: election reform is not just about machines. There is no doubt we need to replace the machines. But there are many more flaws in our election system.

Throughout the country, voters who committed no crime were illegally purged from voting rolls as felons, voters faced police roadblocks and other forms of intimidation, and voters with disabilities were faced with voting conditions that denied them the right to vote with privacy and independence that we take for granted. Election reform is the first major civil rights issue of the 21st Century.

In even more routine ways, voters are denied their right to vote. In the 2000 elections, polling places were moved at the last minute with no notice to voters, underpaid and undertrained election personnel were incapable of explaining confusing ballots and registration forms were not processed by state officials in a timely fashion. Voting should not be difficult. Election reform should make it easier.

But, unlike natural disasters, on the fundamental issue of protecting the right to vote, the federal government has done woefully little to help the states.

Because the Supreme Court has indicated that these election irregularities impact the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution,

we must have national standards for all federal elections and, in so doing, provide the states with a model of excellence.

Specifically, I believe – at a minimum – we should require that all voting machines in federal elections:

- allow a voter to check his vote before it is cast,
- protect against overvoting and undervoting,
- produce an auditable record,
- be accessible to individuals with disabilities, language minorities, and other individuals with special needs, including the right to vote with privacy and independence.

In every federal election, any voter who believes she is wrongfully being denied her right to vote must be permitted to cast a provisional ballot, the ballot should be promptly investigated and, if appropriate, counted.

In every federal election, a voter must receive a sample ballot, instructions for casting the ballot and notification of their voting rights.

Very shortly, Senator Dodd and I will introduce a bill that will do just that, the “Equal Protection of Voting Rights Act.” Representative Carrie Meek, who is with us today, is an original cosponsor.

We have to help to states get there. It will be costly. I believe it will cost billions of dollars to upgrade election machinery and educate voters.

But we shouldn’t shrink away from making this investment in our democracy. It is about the legitimacy of our elections. And, while it may cost billions to do it right, this week we are talking about a tax cut that costs at least 200 times more.

We need complete election reform, election reform that addresses voting rights issues. And the clock is ticking. The next federal elections are 20 months away. We must get started.

I applaud this Committee and Chairman McCain for taking this important first step by holding the first bipartisan Congressional hearing on this issue.